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ABSTRACT

Because of the vast differences between the ghetto child and the middle class child in home environment, parental models, language development, and the ability and desire to communicate, an elementary school language program which will educate both must differ radically from traditional orientations and practices. Such a program should provide the child with continuous, daily opportunities to talk, including such activities as discussion, reporting, dramatic play, story-telling, and choral reading. To insure the learner's active involvement, an effective program in oral communication must be relevant to his life and interests, must be characterized by novelty and diversity, and must stress meaningful vocabulary development, including sensory or emotionally charged words. The instructional techniques used should be open-ended, so that both the accelerated and disadvantaged learner may participate, each at his own level, each deriving the vital feelings of worth and acceptance which constitute the success of any learning experience. (MF)

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Defensible Assumptions Concerning Oral Language

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Defensible Assumptions Concerning Oral Language

A little five-year old had been watching the TV coverage of the moon landing with great interest. Wanting to explore his level of understanding and assuming that he would surely have aspirations to become an astronaut I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. Without hesitation, he replied, "I think I'll be a paleontologist." I immediately made a second erroneous assumption. "This has been fed to him," I thought, "It's only rote regurgitation." "What will you do when you become a paleontologist," I asked. "Oh, I'll dig up bones of pterodactyls and brontosaurus," he answered. "And what will you do with the bones?" "I'll study them and their surroundings and then they'll be assembled and put in museums."

In quite a different situation, I asked an extremely disadvantaged rural black child to give a one-word title to a picture he had created by blowing tempera paint through a soda-straw. Glowing with pride because his picture had been chosen for special attention, he twisted and looked, and finally , after much thought, he said, "Them's ratches." "I didn't understand you," I stalled, hoping for some miracle of understanding. He repeated, "Them's ratches runnin' 'round." I was bewildered and frustrated. Was a breakdown in communications to destroy all the rapport and pride I had worked so hard to develop? Finally, a perceptive child realized my problem. "He means roaches," she whispered.

These two anecdotes point up the first defensible assumption which should guide the school's efforts to develop language ability. The classroom in America are populated with children whose language backgrounds are as widely divergent as if they come from different countries. Indeed, they do come from different worlds.

The first child comes from the background best understood by school people. He is a product of our homes, our values, our expectations. From a standpoint of readiness to participate in the school culture and, specifically, to learn and to practice acceptable speech patterns, he comes to school provided with:

1. A home environment filled with a rich variety of objects and play materials

which he may see, feel, and manipulate, with the stimulation of shopping trips, sight-seeing excursions, visits and birthday parties, with provocative puzzles and games and with many reading materials.

2. Family contacts during which his questions are encouraged and answered, his opinions are sought and respected and his reactions to what he has read are shared.

3. Parental models who display respect for the school and other social institutions, who cherish the traditions of American culture but welcome opportunities for change and progress, who read and read to him, who communicate high but realistic expectations, and who reinforce achievement.

In the other world, the world over-run with "ratches," the long-term goals of education have no relevance; getting food for today's gnawing stomachs is a more realistic goal. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow holds no promise; life's experiences have shown it to be unobtainable and probably "fool's gold" anyway. This is the world of rats and roaches, cabbage and curses, derision and distrust, brawls and brats. Children are not the pride and joy of their parents; they are more mouths to feed, more crowded sleeping space, more trouble with the cops, more visits from the attendance officer.

Many of these children come to school with no encouragement from home, no expectations for success or acceptance, no sense of identity with the school situation, no background of appropriate experiences for the usual school tasks, no respect for education or for the people involved in the educational process.

These are the slum children, estimated at one in three of all the children residing in large urban areas, the rural children from Appalachia and the deep South, the 150,000 children of migrant workers with annual incomes of less than $1,000.00, the Indian children who live in unbelievable squalor and poverty.

These disadvantaged children come from a background which is characterized by:

1. A home environment which is squalid, barren, oppressive, and colorless, which is lacking in the intellectual stimulation of games, puzzles, and reading materials, which is too crowded to allow "life space," and geographically restricted to the immediate area.
2. Family contacts which are adult dominated, frequently without a "father figure," marked by lack of conversation, harsh commands, and sullen suspicions of the motives of others.
3. Parental models who have no respect for education, who speak poorly and read nothing at all, who have no hope for themselves nor aspirations for their children, and who regard all esthetic expression as the "sissy frills" of the envied and distrusted "establishment."

The first assumption, then, is that children are different. The differences most relevant to the school's responsibilities in the area of language development are not determined by racial characteristics or by inate ability. The differences occur because they are products of different worlds--worlds which provide parallel living, to be sure, but as disparate as though separated by oceans.

The second assumption is that these differences in background will be manifested in striking dissimilarities in language development. The language of most middle-class children can be categorically described as elaborative; the language of most lower class children falls somewhere along the continium of usage which is best described as restrictive. The specific characteristics of the two language patterns are pointed up in these comparisons:

1. Sentence fragments versus complete sentences which may be compound or complex in structure.
2. Inability to hold to a subject versus fluent use of language to communicate

a cohesive idea or series of ideas.

3. Limited and repetitive use of adjectives and adverbs versus an adequate supply of precise, colorful descriptive words.

4. Flat categorical statements confusing reason and result versus qualifying statements based on reason and order.

5. Restricted versus frequent use of the personal pronoun "I."

6. Repetitive use of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms versus more formal expressive symbolism.

7. Excessive use of conjunctions (so, well, then) to begin or join sentences versus modification and stress developed through the use of carefully selected prepositional phrases, conjunctions and subordinate clauses.

8. Frequent use of pronouns without antecedents (especially "they") versus more careful delineation of referrents.

9. Harsh, abrupt vulgarisms versus polite, acceptable terminology.

So the differences in language ability are real, and they are quite likely to be found in some degree in every classroom. If education is ever to give more than lip-service to the concept of individual differences and the goal of personalized instruction; if we are ever to succeed in developing real language power; if we are ever to meet our responsibilities for producing young people who can function effectively in a dynamic, articulate world society, we must come to grips with a third assumption. We must assume that the two youngsters I have described and their millions of counterparts in classrooms in America need a program of language development that is radically different from the traditional orientation and practices at work in most elementary schools.

Years of experience and experimentation as a classroom teacher, as an elementary school principal, and, more recently, as a college professor involved in teacher preparation have convinced this writer that a fundamental cause of difficulties

with language usage is the lack of provision for the development of oral language skills at the elementary-school level. Some children never learn to express their ideas because they have neither the opportunities nor the tools for effective oral communication. They are expected to use language in writing and reading long before they have had experiences that would help them develop concepts of its symbolic nature and communicative function. They are asked to read before they are capable of coping with abstract thought and to write before they have anything to say.

The key to a productive program in language development is the provision of opportunities for children to talk! This sounds deceptively simple. Our little paleontologist has a real need to talk because he has many experiences and ideas to relate and many words to use. Our country child has no conscious need to talk. Talk about what? To whom? For what purpose? He has probably learned a long time ago that the school isn't interested in the kind of experiences he has had and is quite likely to be highly critical of the manner in which he describes them.

We must assume, then, that an effective program in oral communication must be based on certain fundamental characteristics. First, there must be planned continuity of effort. Every school day should be planned to include learning experiences based on oral participation. Such activities include conversation, discussion, reporting, dramatic play, story-telling, choral reading, building charts, and sentence transformation. Each of these activities requires a developmental set of skills and abilities so planning for scope and sequence is as important as planning for their inclusion.

The second and third characteristics go hand in hand. The content of the language experience must be relevant to the lives and interests of the learners, and this relevance insures their active involvement. Are there topics which capture the imagination and curiosity of all children regardless of differences in ability and background? At various age levels, nearly all children are interested in

animals, fantasy, great men and women, brave deeds, exciting adventure, sights, sounds, smells, sportsmanship, games and sports--the list could go on ad infinitum. Teaching techniques which utilize these kinds of subject-matter will give every child an opportunity to participate and have even the most reticent eager to tell his contribution.

Master teachers have a large repertory of teaching strategies for the development of oral language skills. Some of these strategies are remarkably simple. One teacher with face aglow and eyes twinkling faced a group of youngsters and said, "When I woke up this morning, I could smell the honeysuckle through my open window. It smelled so good that I could see the sunshine and taste a picnic lunch. Close your eyes and tell me what you smelled this morning and what the odor made you think of." The children were delighted. They talked about bacon and coffee and mother's perfume and hot chocolate. Some strategies are more complicated. Another teacher told a story about monkeys and then used it to develop sentence sense and letter sounds. Her children proceeded to improvise such sentences as:

Mischievous monkeys made man mad.

Merry monkeys mocked the man's manners.

The fourth characteristic of a good program in oral communication is novelty and diversity. There are hundreds of techniques. Finding and using them requires only a little effort and creativity from the teacher. They pay off in greater interest and improved language usage from the children.

Fifth, the program must concentrate on vocabulary development. Whatever happens along the way to change the rich, vivid language of the young child to the sterile, monosyllabic language which characterizes so much of the oral expression of later years. Words are our stock in trade--the building blocks of oral communication. Mauree Applegate, one of the great masters of using the right word at the right time tells us:

No more useful legacy could a school teacher leave with her school children

than to give them a feeling for words--an "insatiable curiosity" about words. Words can be tasted, smelled, heard, felt, seen, and put into action. They help us to understand the world we live in and the people we live with. They help us to know the false. They help us to say exactly what we mean. In diplomacy, if we do not have the right words, even our nation is in peril. The wrong word causes us to lose out in business and in the business of living. How many people know half as much about the right word to use as they know about the right costume to wear?[1]

The answer to Dr. Applegate's question is obvious--not many! This poses another question. What is done in the classrooms of the nation to develop sensitivity to words and vividness of expression? Again, not much! Certainly, the deadly "vocabulary list" won't do it. Children don't develop that "insatiable curiosity" about words by writing definitions and sentences with such obscure words as verbosity and titillate. They can and do become vitally interested if the language program provides learning experiences which utilize word clusters--the sensory words, the emotionally-charged words, the people words, city words, country words, space words. Children enjoy keeping their own "Word Books" and using the words in word games, experience charts, and personal writing.

Finally, the techniques used in the development of language power should be open-ended. That is, they should be planned and implemented in such a way that the accelerated learner can "plug-in" at his level of achievement while the child with learning difficulties can contribute at his. The privileged child may give a word like "gluttonous" when asked for a describing word; the disadvantaged child may contribute "fat" to the same list. One may listen to a story and tell the simple

[1]Mauree Applegate, Helping Children Write (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson and Company, 1961), p.131.

sequence of events; others may identify the author's deeper intent from the same experience. The point is that both are able to make worthwhile contributions; both may feel successful. And, in the final analysis, those feelings of worthiness and acceptance constitute the real success of any learning experience. So, to all the listeners here and to all the children in classrooms throughout the country, the best wish is for "Happy Talking!"